
ONLINE AUDIENCES AND TELEVISED POLITICAL DEBATES: SHIFTING DISCOURSES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Public participation in political broadcasting has offered an important site for engagement between citizens and their elected representatives in interactions which take place live, on air, and often in front of a studio audience. As technology has advanced, producers have taken advantage of the affordances of digital media in broadcasting political debates, shifting frameworks of participation beyond the studio and inviting participation across a range of media platforms. Here I examine the online audience activity, prior to, during and after televised leaders' debates in the run up to the UK 2010 general election, focussing on how this audience engages in various contextually relevant forms of discursive interactivity, oriented towards a position of spectatorship rather than through engagement with content.

Keywords : debate, media, participation, politics, publics

Introduction

The 'legacy' media (i.e. radio and television) have traditionally offered a site for direct engagement between citizens and their elected representatives in the context of programme formats such as TV debates, talk shows and panel discussions, as well as in radio phone-ins, and as such, they have provided an important arena of the contemporary 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989). Within such programmes, mediated by a host, participants are given the opportunity to question politicians directly about current issues and policies, and crucially, they are able to hold those politicians accountable for their policies in face-to-face interaction which takes place live on air. This form of interaction is the staple institutional business and primary goal of the live broadcast event.

Increasingly however, over the past decade or so broadcasters have been experimenting with formats for public participation beyond the studio, and digitally mediated participation is now routinely integrated into most traditional

genres of broadcast political debate. Focusing specifically on data from televised political debates in the UK, I propose to examine how the presence of an online audience has affected the participation framework of the televised event, which is built around activities of questioning and opinion-giving, and how the forms of engagement of online audiences differ considerably from those of co-present, participating studio audiences. Taking a discourse analytic approach to the forms of 'talk' activities of both these audience constituencies, I will show how the different frameworks of participation within the context of the televised and online public sphere give rise to different discursive activities (Levinson 1979), and thus raise some important questions about the shifting forms of public political engagement in relation to legitimation, access and accountability.

1. Studio-based and web-based audience participation in live debates

In TV debates it is frequently the case that when taking the floor to ask a question, members of the studio audience routinely build relevant, authentic, situated identities from which to speak, and through which they legitimise forms of ordinary expertise in the expression of political opinions. Furthermore, these opinions are generally not presented as separate, discrete, free-floating objects, but are situated contextually and grounded discursively within the debate; they are woven together to project alternative points of view, to be for or against a position, and are often tied to social attributes, categories, or other sequentially relevant participant identities (see Fitzgerald & Housley 2002, Thornborrow 2015). The following illustrative example is taken from the 'Leaders' Debate' hosted in by David Dimbleby in a BBC 1 *Question Time Special* in the run up to the UK parliamentary elections in May 2015:

Extract One

- | | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 1 | DD | right the lady there on the gallery yes you |
| 2 | Aud | ((applause)) |
| 3 | A1 | uh just going back to your letter for a moment |
| 4 | | the letter that that- Mr Cameron you called as a prop |
| 5 | Mil | yes |
| 6 | A1 | I run a business here in Leeds the last five years have been |
| 7 | | really hard work but we've got a plan now and the economy's improving |
| 8 | | what worries me is that you're about to put Ed Balls back in as |
| 9 | | a chancellor and he called that letter a <u>joke</u> now let me tell you (.) |
| 10 | | running a business for the last few years is anything but a joke |
| 11 | | and if that's the way <u>your</u> party wants to treat the economy |
| 12 | | (.) <u>how</u> can we trust you. |

In this extract, the member of the audience selected as next speaker by the host contextualises her question (line 3) in relation to a previous point made by Labour leader Ed Miliband (the ‘prop’ refers to a note allegedly left by an outgoing Labour treasury minister saying there was ‘no money left’). She provides a legitimate domain of expertise relevant to that point (lines 6 -9) and to her upcoming question (lines 11-12). This type of question design is routinely found in the opening stages of audience participant turns, where the interactional framework of the broadcast functions precisely to enable space for members of the audience to engage in questioning politicians face-to-face, and to hold them to account for their policies directly, live, on air (Thornborrow 2001, 2015; Thornborrow & Fitzgerald 2013, 2017). The same question design has also been identified as a routine feature of calls to political radio phone-ins. However, when digitally mediated questions (via texts or emails from listeners) are embedded within on-going live sequences of talk between hosts, callers and a featured politician, the talk shifts into dialogic interaction between host and politician and becomes more of a political interview, in which the original author of the question is often not treated as an active, or even ratified listening participant (Thornborrow & Fitzgerald 2002). Interactivity cannot produce interaction between an email questioner and politician in the same way as live calls do between caller and politician.

There are to date relatively few studies of the discursive participation of audiences who are active online during political debates on television, but research so far suggests that, just as in radio phone-in programmes, the introduction of online interactive participation does not result in more interaction between participants. In her study of public participation in the debates on immigration and asylum in Britain, broadcast by the BBC in July 2003 in a dedicated schedule, ‘Asylum Day’, in which interactivity – in the form of posts to the website forum, emails, calls and text messages – was repeatedly invited, Myra Macdonald (2007) questioned whether the integration of facilities for online participation into the broadcast television studio discussions really did offer more possibilities for widening access to public debate and engagement via the interactive media. Commenting specifically on the participation framework and organization of two of the dedicated programmes, *Face the Nation* and *You the Judge*, each of which included interactive participation, she observed that ‘distilled into voting statistics, or sound-bite extracts from SMSs or emails selected by the programme makers, the voice of the viewer punctuated rather

than led discussion' (Macdonald 2007: 681). She also noted that while interactivity was specifically encouraged, interaction between the studio audience and experts was discouraged, and that when 'emotions ran high and interaction threatened to erupt, the presenter [...] diverted attention quickly onto a new topic' (Macdonald 2007: 681). She concluded that 'while Asylum Day offered varied means of participating in the debate, it produced surprisingly little direct engagement between those holding different points of view' (Macdonald 2007: 683).

A few years later in April 2010, in the run up to the UK general election, televised 'Leaders' Debates' were broadcast for the first time live in the UK over three weeks on ITV, BSkyB and BBC networks (in that order). Viewers were invited to submit questions to the party leaders before they went on air, either by email or via the website, which were then read out by the host, live, in front of the studio audience. However, the participatory 'rules' during these first debates stipulated that the studio audience was not allowed to respond to what the leaders said, or show any other form of reaction such as applause or laughter. This participatory framework is highly unusual for a UK TV audience participation programme where, in contrast to some other European national broadcasters¹, audiences are generally very active, aligning or dis-aligning with those on the panel or platform through visual reactions: nods, headshakes or other non-verbal modes of response, and through collective applause. On this occasion, on the other hand, online viewers were invited to post their reactions to the unfolding debate on the TV channels' website forums. These constraints radically changed the participant status of the studio audience, whose role became one of ratified, yet awkwardly silent, spectators to the debate taking place between the three candidates, while simultaneously, verbal reactions to the debate were invited and being produced elsewhere, i.e. in posts on line.

2. Online audience activity during the BBC debate

In a previous analysis of online participation in these debates (Thornborrow 2015), I argued that the online audience did not engage in questioning as such, but rather in discursive activities of commentary and evaluation through which they positioned themselves as spectators, but not necessarily contributors, to the

¹ In French main public service channel broadcasting, for example, the audience are co-present but non active.

on-going live debate. We should also bear in mind that on this occasion, the studio audience were also positioned as spectators rather than active contributors, and instructed not to react or show any form of response to the leaders' performance. The examples that follow are taken from the BBC News website forum 'Have your Say' for the final debate on BBC, on 29th April. They were posted in response to the following question on the website shortly after the debate had started:

The party leaders have finished their opening remarks. Who did you think was the most impressive?

This question generated about forty response posts to the forum just within the 3-4 minute period that followed between 8.43 and 8.46 p.m. Out of the 14 posts numbered 25 to 38 shown in Table 1 below, one was removed by the moderator, five were comments evaluating the candidates' appearance and performance (27, 30, 35, 37 and 38) while five expressed an opinion (25, 26, 29, 31, 36) and three asked a question (32, 33, 34)².

Table 1

25. At [8:43pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [J-----7](#) wrote:

That's it.....I've had enough, is DC sponsored by Mothercare?
Every week, M&S this, Mothercare that! Hmph!
With Respect.

26. At [8:43pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [C---s](#) wrote:

Greedy businessmen say the tories are right - no surprise. A bit like bankers saying they deserve their bonuses. Same old Tory values!

27. At [8:43pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [b-----e](#) wrote:

some stabbing now going on! Fight!!!

28. At [8:43pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [A-----e](#) wrote:

This comment was removed because the moderators found it broke the [House Rules](#).

29. At [8:44pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [D---e](#) wrote:

I love it when cameron says marks and spencer, mothercare, sainsburys do not support "tax on jobs" but lets face it if the bosses from these places took alittle off there fat bonuses maybe it wouldnt be so bad. it just seems like all the big spenders dont wanna help they want to keep there money so the smaller working classes get footed with the bill.

30. At [8:44pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [J-----7](#) wrote:

I'm going to focus on the real issues. They are wearing far too much foundation.
Em..fair point, well made.
With Respect.

31. At [8:44pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [K-----e](#) wrote:

Brown going back to good old-fashioned Keynesian economics - like it!

32. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [S-----e](#) wrote:

Where are the millions of jobs for those out of work Mr Cameron?

² In this Table and all subsequent examples the text contains original errors. Nothing has been corrected.

33. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [E-----b](#) wrote:
getting the scroungers and wasters back into work is a great aspiration...how will the conservatives do it?
34. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [B-----n](#) wrote:
Cameron is like a record stuck in a groove; has he got nothing new to say?
35. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [b-----e](#) wrote:
Confused government and taxes?/
It will be a fight now even more
36. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [C----s](#) wrote:
cameron is kidding himself if he thinks you can get an extra 12bn efficiency savings in 9 months - and yes it will take cash out of the economy
37. At [8:45pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [A-----y](#) wrote:
Why does Gordon continually shake his head, it just makes him look even more like he doesn't want to be on camera and he is shying away from the real questions...
38. At [8:46pm](#) on 29 Apr 2010, [W-----l](#) wrote:
Q1 : The Deficit
Cameron: 5/10
Clegg: 5/10
Brown: 5/10
dull and predictable

Several points can be noted here. Firstly, looking at these posts in terms of their discursive actions, although several opinions are expressed the only post which contains a response to a previous poster is (30). One poster (32) addresses a question to Cameron: 'Where are the millions of jobs for those out of work Mr Cameron?' but this is a rhetorical, 'quasi-interactional' question (also noted by Macdonald (2007) in the Asylum Day debates) which gets no reaction from any of the other online participants. In (27) we also find a rhetorical directive, addressed to the 'combatants' in the debate: 'Fight!!!' It thus seems that while the possibility of online exchange and discussion between posters is available, and that the poster in (29) offers a clear political point which might have been taken up by others, the majority of the posts were, just as Macdonald (2007) found in her analysis of the Asylum Day broadcasts, primarily monologic and serial rather than dialogic. In other words, there was 'no greater degree of dialogic communication than occurs through traditional programming.' (Macdonald 2007: 683).

Secondly, these posts are entirely different in design from the kind of questions, opinions and responses usually produced in live exchanges on air. No relevant participant identity is given by the poster. This could mainly be due to the conventions of digital technology where individual identity tends to only be revealed as an on-screen name or 'handle', but as can be seen in the sequence of posts shown in Table 1, unlike studio-based participants, none of the posters to the forum provided any further information regarding either their social identity

or domain of situated expertise (see Thornborrow 2015). Their participation consists of rhetorical questions, comments and opinions that are disconnected from any explicitly claimed, relevant grounding of social or experiential knowledge. So, while the web-based forum certainly enabled a much greater number and variety of participant contributions than would be possible in a live studio environment, occurring as they did online over a relatively short span of time, the form of this participation is entirely different from that of a studio audience, and oriented mainly to commenting on the unfolding televised event itself, rather than engaging with issues arising from the emerging political debate. The views and opinions expressed were fragmented and largely disconnected from each other, appearing in individual posts dealing with what was occurring live on screen, rather than dialogic exchanges of views and opinions in relation to the developing debate.

Finally, in contrast to the routine co-present interactions between studio audiences and politicians, the online posts showed little evidence of any contributor speaking as a representative on behalf of a wider social community or group. This is perhaps unsurprising in the sense that the primary activity engaged in by posters to the forum was very much within the frame set up by the BBC forum website and the question prompt ‘Who is the most impressive?’ This question invites an evaluative assessment of the leaders’ performances, and posters respond accordingly to provide that assessment in a variety of ways (including scores, encouragement and disparaging remarks as shown in Table 1 above). What emerges as the overarching, relevant identity category in that specific moment is one of spectatorship: posters are watching the debate, reacting to what they are seeing live on screen, and engaging in the discursive activities of commentary and evaluation. They are not contributing to a position or argument in the debate in terms of a potentially relevant participant identity as representatives of a particular social or professional category or group. Given the initial BBC forum question, and this participatory role of spectator, it is then no real surprise that in over 2,000 posts to the website that evening, the majority of comments were evaluations of the performance and appearance of each leader, or as one poster put it: ‘how they did and what they looked like’ as much as evaluations of their policies³.

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/haveyoursay/2010/04/prime_ministerial_debate_your_2.html

3. Discursive activity on pre- and post-debate discussion forums

On 22nd April, once the initial debate had taken place on ITV, the BBC News forum question prompts were oriented towards the two upcoming broadcasts, as shown in Table 2 below. These contained requests for questions about relevant issues and proposed content, as well as requesting online participation in a panel to discuss 'the debate itself'.

Table 2

<i>The second prime ministerial debate takes place on Thursday and it will focus on foreign affairs. What issues need to be discussed?</i>
<i>Will you watch the debate? What do you want the three party leaders to discuss? Who do you think will come out on top?</i>
<i>Tell us what questions you would like to see the leaders answer in the BBC's prime ministerial debate. Or if you would like to be part of a BBC panel discussing the debate itself, let us know</i>
<i>What would you do if you were Prime Minister? Send us your clip and get on our video wall.</i>

Posts to the BBC forum in this intervening period between the first and second debate contained very different kinds of activity compared to that taking place during the final debate as I have just described. Essentially, as the following examples show, they were responses to the question 'What do you want the party leaders to discuss?' Some posters suggested a single item:

At [19:14](#) 21st Apr 2010, XX wrote:

Foreign Policy: please let us disentangle ourselves from foreign adventures.

At [19:29](#) 21st Apr 2010, XX wrote:

One word: Afghanistan

Others provided lists:

At [19:08](#) 21st Apr 2010, XX wrote:

Getting out of the EU.

Stop being America's poodle.

Cut back foreign aid.

Putting British Jobs before the jobs of foreigners.

Withdrawing from NATO.

At [19:36](#) 21st Apr 2010, XX wrote:

They need to discuss:

- The removal of foreign aid for those countries that have a space programme e.g. India
- The immediate need for the EU to be audited properly and have the books signed off by an independent firm - otherwise we leave the EU
- Our withdrawal from Afghanistan
- The charging of Blair with war crimes
- A programme to increase our own food production to reduce our reliance on imported goods

And one contributor, in the next example, provided the following extensive set of suggestions in a response to the question ‘What would you do if you were prime minister?’.

At 22:42 21st Apr 2010, XX wrote:

One of the first things I'd do is have a referendum on Europe simply to silence all those who act as if the EU is one huge conspiracy invented by European's for their own Machiavelian schemes. I'd also point out the tens of millions who died in European wars in the fifty years before the introduction of Europe as a political and economic entity. Then I would ask what is the end-game in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and are the policies of H.M. Government helping to secure peace and stability in that important, but troubled region. On nuclear weapons I'd look at a cost, benefits analysis and determine if having nuclear weapons makes Britain more or less secure. Finally, on immigration I would ask myself realistically what can be done about immigration. I suspect in the long term nothing, since large scale migration throughout history has been a noticeable feature of human society and unless we are willing to resort to draconian methods, I'm afraid it's a phenomenon that will always be part of human society. Much like invading other countries and stealing their resources

In online activity on 22nd April after the second debate had taken place, posters were responding to the specific questions posed on the forum, shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3

What did you think of the debate? Who do you think was the strongest? Have you changed your voting preference?

The leaders of the UK's three main political parties have locked horns over foreign affairs in the second prime ministerial debate. What did you think of the programme?

Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg discussed a wide range of issues including the European Union, the Catholic Church, overseas military action and immigration.

What's your reaction to the debate? Who do you think came out on top? Were your questions on foreign policy being answered?

Posts to the forum on 22nd/23rd April contained many more extended expressions of opinion, with some posters occasionally attending to and taking issue with the content of others' posts, but in general, all were responding to one of the specific questions posted on the Forum. These questions generated a very different type of response from those illustrated in the previous set of examples. Posts often were much longer, more elaborate, detailed and informative, as well as more opinionated and argumentative. In some, we still find monologic expressions of opinion or single questions, but many were dialogic, and developed into exchange sequences addressed to other online contributors, as in Extract Two below. This was posted as a follow up to a prior response from ‘Lynn from Sussex’ to the forum question prompt ‘Which leader is most convincing?’

Extract Two

At [20:52](#) 23rd Apr 2010, [J_____k](#) wrote:

39. At 8:39pm on 23 Apr 2010, Lynn from Sussex wrote:

He has done more damage to the country than was done by Hitler during the Second World War.

Oh, get a grip Lynn! Are there half a million dead and many more wounded? Are cities lying in ruins? Are people seriously worse off than they were (how many have mobile phones, computers, media centres, internet access etc etc that they could only dream about in 1997?)? How many are starving or close to it?

You really need to get a sense of perspective if you think the current situation bears any comparison with the aftermath of WW2.

The poster in the next example addresses the forum in general in relation to a question referring to a recently published report on the economic situation, followed by the question, 'Who would you trust to grow Britain's economy?'

Extract Three

At [20:53](#) 23rd Apr 2010, [h_____s](#) wrote:

Interesting reading indeed.

I know most of you will find this very boring at first but please bear with me, I've just been reading the 2009 pre-budget report, what else is there to do on a Friday night right!

It states the following sources of income for the treasury for the following tax years from the introduction of the new bank payroll tax.

2009 / 10 - £550 million

2010 / 11 - £Nil

2011 / 12 - £Nil

2012 / 13 - £Nil

Very, very interesting indeed.

And Extract Four, posted earlier the same day, is produced in direct response to a previous contributor. (The text between ///--/// is quoted from the post being responded to.) :

Extract Four

1504. At [4:54pm](#) on 23 Apr 2010, [P-----I](#) wrote:

//// Make no mistake, 13 years of LABOUR has messed up Britain big style and they will continue to mess thing up.////

Obviously you don't know politics.

The screwing up of this country began in the 80's under Thatcher, New Labour have merely continued it.

The final example in this selection of post-debate contributions, responding to the question 'Who do you think came out on top?', is in a lighter key to the previous three. In Extract Five the party leaders are ranked using an extended analogy between their performance and the kind of cars they drive:

Extract Five

1st (by a whisker) Dave in his Aston (still British built, room for a family in the back [just], smooth, fast and graceful but may be too conservative in its design for some, also lacks real crackle and oomph ..[...].

2nd. Nick in his Ferrari (brand new, only driven twice, revs well, engine may lack torque. Beautiful Italian design, and turns heads in the street, however rather sharp and flashy, built in Europe [...])

3rd. Gordo in his Austin Healy 2000 (1977 model, the company went bust years ago [under Labour] but you can still get the parts [probably from China or India [...]])

These examples show individual posters interacting with each other, opinions are expressed and challenged, contributions are designed for specific recipients, and some are occasionally playful and creative. The debate is now taking place online in exchanges between forum participants. No longer engaged in being spectators, commenting on the leaders' performance during the live broadcast event, this posting activity constructs a virtual public sphere of political debate.

Conclusion: Access, legitimacy and accountability

Myra Macdonald made the point that interactivity does not challenge existing social and political structures when treated simply as 'a technical, if highly marketable, innovation' by the broadcast media (Macdonald 2007: 687). In conclusion to this paper, I would like to return to the question of what interactivity does in this context of public participation in mediated political debates, and what it does not do.

Firstly, does it widen public access to the broadcast event, and if so, how? As evidence from the data here shows, the primary orientation of participants online is towards active spectatorship. The forum provides the online audience with a platform to do being spectators, however, this is achieved through discursive actions of commentary and evaluation that studio audiences do not engage in. On the other hand, co-presence in the studio always constitutes the potential possibility for interaction, a participatory role in the event that online audiences cannot share. Interactive participation thus seems to offer the online audience no other locally relevant action than that of current spectator to the live broadcast event as it unfolds elsewhere. As such, their online reactions are bound up with a different kind of situated activity altogether: the assessment and evaluation of the unfolding debate and the candidates' performance in real time.

Secondly, there is the question of legitimation. The questions and opinions of members of the studio audience are produced in direct interaction with other participants in the debate for a listening/viewing audience, and routinely produced in turns through which speakers display an orientation to locally relevant social identities, situated expertise, or representation. In other words, they provide legitimate grounding, or warrants, for those views. Questions and opinions delivered online, by members of a non-co-present, post-event audience, are not designed in this way. Indeed, online opinion-

giving on the BBC forum during this pre-election period was rarely framed by locally relevant identity work, and posters' views are delivered without being publicly warranted through relevant positions of public engagement.

Finally, what does online interactivity contribute to public engagement with policy and political representation? As we have seen, many of the posts to the BBC forum website 'Have Your Say' during the debate were direct evaluations of and commentary on the political leaders' mediated performance. After the debate, posters continued to express their views online, sometimes recontextualising serious political points through shifts of key, a textual creativity designed for the wider reciprocity of an online reading audience. Participants in the online debate address each other, within a communicative environment that, unlike live co-present interaction, does not produce direct responses from those accountable for the policies and political actions being discussed. What subsequent use is made of online Forum data as a source of public opinion is another matter.

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